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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 000306

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL EU SY AF AU

SUBJECT: AUSTRIA: MFA MIDDLE EAST DIRECTOR ON MIDDLE EAST POLICY - SOME DIFFERENCES WITH U.S.

REF: A. VIENNA 238

1B. STATE 19807

1C. VIENNA 53

1D. BRATISLAVA 128

Classified by: CDA J. Dean Yap for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: CDA and Polchief met March 13 with Ralph Scheide, MFA Middle East Director, to discuss Middle East policy and Scheide's planned visit to Washington and New York March 20 to April 3. Scheide expressed views that could be contrary to USG Middle East policy, suggesting that a Palestinian "reconciliation government" including Hamas need not explicitly endorse the quartet principles and arguing for approval of an EU-Syria Association Agreement to encourage Syria, but failed to mention that Syrian President Assad is planning to visit Austria in April. Scheide also reported that the MFA is preparing to host an Afghanistan nation building conference in the late spring, but seemed uninterested in internal GOA discussions on training for Afghan police. End Summary.

Favors Palestinian "Reconciliation Government"

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12. (C) Echoing comments made to the Secretary by EU External Affairs Commissioner (and Austrian national) Benita Ferrero-Waldner (reftel B), Scheide maintained that the formation of a Palestinian "reconciliation government" including Hamas could help advance the peace process. He said PM Fayyad had offered to resign in order to make way for such a government. Fayyad, whom the GOA holds in high regard, could perhaps serve as an advisor to President Abbas, Scheide mused. CDA stressed that any Palestinian government would have to accept the quartet principles -- including the recognition of Israel's right to exist and the renunciation of violence -- in order to negotiate with Israel. Israel cannot accept a government that fails to do this as a legitimate interlocutor. Scheide replied that a Palestinian government must also have credibility with Palestinians in order to pursue peace, and argued that the international community should be "flexible" regarding the form such a government might take and how it handled the quartet principles.

Ready to "Go Forward" on EU-Syria Agreement

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13. (C) Scheide said that within the EU there was a "willingness to go forward" with the EU-Syria Association Agreement. Contrary to what Scheide's deputy told us in January (reftel C), Scheide maintained that it was "hard to argue against" the agreement, a step that would encourage the

Syrians to keep moving toward peace. He claimed that Lebanese PM Signora was in favor of closer cooperation between the West and Syria, and between Syria and Lebanon. While acknowledging that Syria had not followed through on a commitment to appoint an Ambassador to Lebanon, Scheide noted Syria had selected a diplomat for the post.

¶4. (C) Scheide failed to mention that Syrian President Assad is planning to visit Austria in April. Based on a tip from Embassy Bratislava (reftel D), we asked Scheide deputy Wolfgang Lapuh March 16 whether an Assad visit was in the works. Lapuh confirmed that the office of Austrian President Fischer is planning an Assad visit, tentatively set for late April. Lapuh said Scheide would discuss the visit during his Washington consultations.

Afghanistan Conference

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¶5. (C) Scheide reported that the MFA has been speaking with Cheryl Bernard, wife of former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Khalilzad, about serving as host for a conference on Afghanistan nation building. The conference, to be organized by the Rand Institute, would include government officials, academics, and NGO representatives. The MFA is hoping that Afghan FM Spanta will attend the conference, which will likely take place in May or June. In Washington, Scheide will apparently seek a senior USG presence; he described the conference as potentially Austria's contribution toward resolving the Afghan conflict. CDA asked Scheide whether the GOA was still considering offering training for Afghan police

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(reftel A). Scheide did not seem familiar with the details of the issue, but said he believed police training remained under consideration.

Comment: Meeting Underscores Concerns

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¶6. (C) This meeting underscored many of our longstanding concerns about Scheide's approach to Middle East policy. He often appears more interested in hosting high-level, well-publicized conferences (and filling Vienna hotels) than with concrete efforts, such as providing police training for Afghanistan. Though he didn't mention Assad's upcoming visit, had he done so, he likely would have used recent USG engagement with Syria as justification for a rapid upgrade of Syrian-EU relations.

YAP